



Chemetco plant demolition begins in Hartford

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HARTFORD - Chemetco closed its doors nearly a decade ago and left behind an environmental disaster, but state officials watched Tuesday as work got under way to clear the site.

Officials with the Illinois Environmental Protection Agency, along with state Rep. Dan Beiser, D-Alton, and state Sen. William Haine, D-Alton, were on the grounds of the failed copper smelter as demolition crews began dismantling the large facility. The site is listed on the U.S. EPA's Superfund National Priorities List.

"This is the first step in the entire process to cleaning up this site," said Chris Cahnovsky, IEPA regional manager. "This building should be

gone by November 30th."

Cahnovsky and others watched as a large crane hoisted a 41,000-pound iron manifold from the roof of the facility, bringing it to the ground, where it will sit until it is disassembled and sold for scrap.

"When the furnaces were operating, the manifold collects a percentage of the dust that was created in the smelting process," he said.

Haine said he was pleased to finally see the monstrosity of a building start to come down.

"The decision to place a business at this site was a corrupt act," Haine said.

He said he believes the secondary copper smelting business never should have been allowed to be built under Madison County zoning ordinances.

"It was wrong from the beginning," he said.

The company opened in June 1969 as Chemico Metals Corp. and changed its name to Chemetco in 1973. The company closed Nov. 1, 2001.

On April 21, 1999, a federal grand jury indicted the company's former owner and CEO, Denis L. Feron, and five of his employees with violating the United States Clean Water Act.

Despite regular monitoring of Chemetco by EPA officials, Feron ordered the construction of a secret pipe through which he authorized the pumping of millions of gallons of water containing heavy metals and other hazardous waste into Long Lake and nearby wetlands. Environmental inspectors discovered the pipe in 1996.

The company was ordered to pay a \$3.86 million fine and filed bankruptcy in November 2001.

Feron fled in 2008 and was on the EPA's "most wanted list." In 2010, Feron struck a deal and paid \$500,000 in restitution, and all charges were dropped.

Before closing, the plant produced about 50 percent of the U.S. copper output from non-mined sources.

The IEPA took over and sealed the site in December 2001. The state is overseeing the demolition of the buildings, which is being done by American Integrated Services Inc.

Cahnovsky said at least one building would remain on the site for storage.

Decontamination of the buildings and the surrounding areas was done prior to the start of the demolition.

Both the state and federal governments have worked with the courts in cleaning up the site and recover any funds that come available from recycling the materials.

The metals from the building will be recycled, and the proceeds will go to the bankruptcy estate to settle some of the debt.

IEPA spokeswoman Maggie Carson said the EPA would oversee the removal of the slag from the site. More than 500,000 cubic yards of slag, sludge and other hazardous materials were left on portions of the 41-acre site.

Elevated levels of heavy metals, copper, cadmium, lead and zinc have been found in adjacent wetlands and in the sediment of Long Lake.

Cahnovsky said the general public never really faced any danger from the contamination waste disposal.

In 1999, the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry reported that in addition to water pollution, one of the health hazards of the site was inhalation of airborne particles of heavy metals. Officials took steps to subdue the dust particles by constantly keeping it sprayed with water.

Cahnovsky said the company knew there was environmental contamination before the secret pipeline even was discovered. He said that when the IEPA was testing air quality, the company even went as far to place semi-trucks with sprinklers as a buffer in front of the emission monitors.

Haine thanked the IEPA for all its efforts and working hard to make sure the contaminated site was remediated. He said he believes the community was "raped and pillaged" by the company.

"Someone should have went to jail for what happened here," he said. "Instead, the taxpayers are picking up the bill."

Beiser agreed. He said it was a shame what the company did and how it left its facility.

"It's almost as if they built it knowing they were going to breach the law," he said.

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